

POSSIBLE IMPACTS ON THE SUBJECTIVE QUALITY OF LIFE OF CHILDREN AFTER DIVORCE/SEPARATION OF PARENTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Submitted: 2021-09-21

Accepted: 2021-12-22

Published online: 2021-12-31

Abstract

Introduction: Divorce and separation of parents have a significant impact on the quality of life of children. The experience and psychological development of these children are often affected by parental disputes, which also results in changes in their quality of life.

Goal: This research aims to show what impact a divorce/separation of parents can have on children's subjective quality of life, including the effects on the psyche, and the realization of the child's right to both parents in the Czech Republic.

Methods: The research was carried out by qualitative document analysis, specifically the grounded theory technique. Ten families who needed an expert opinion for a childcare agreement underwent a thorough qualitative analysis of file documentation. The obtained information was subjected to coding, and the main result established grounded claims.

Results and discussion: The main benefit of the research is that it shows the most significant problems are caused by parents' efforts to reduce access rights or win disputes over childcare. Often, parents do not hesitate to use various forms of behaviour that are ultimately the most hurtful for children. These threaten the successful mental development of the children and decrease the subjective quality of life. The ideal way to rectify the relationship is to try to reach an agreement, which can make it easier and fairer for both parents, with the help of mediation and psychological counselling.

Conclusions: The analysis and interpretation of the obtained data revealed that the divorce/separation of the parents is stressful for children. Still, the most significant problems are caused by the efforts of the parents to win disputes concerning the care of the children by various means. However, this kind of behaviour is ultimately the most hurtful for children and threatens their successful mental development.

Keywords: *Children's feelings; Ending of a relationship; Divorce; Quality of life; Right to both parents*

INTRODUCTION

The article deals with the divorce and separation of parents and their subsequent disputes over care – which are unfortunately increasingly common in the Czech Republic. Divorce/separation also interferes with fulfilling the child's right to both parents, or at least its frequency. These interventions can then harm the child's psychological development and perception of their quality of life.

Quality of life

Quality of life is a subjective term that is perceived differently by each individual. The perception of this concept is also influenced by economic, sociological, psychological, or ecological aspects (Mareš et al., 2007; Payne et al., 2005). Quality of life is mainly defined by individual perception and the individual assessment of the quality of life (Payne et al., 2005). Divorce/separation of parents has a significant impact on a child's life. It can affect their future quality of life; especially if the parents have protracted disputes. The child witnesses these arguments, or may become a means of manipulation (Clemente et al., 2019). The parents' desire to settle scores can affect the mental health of children, or their relationship with one of the parents. Discarded parent syndrome is a serious phenomenon (Tomešová, 2019). Good relationships with both parents are a prerequisite for children to perceive their lives as good and satisfactory (Branje, 2018).

There are other influencing aspects in the child-parent relationship. In connection with a parent's divorce/separation, a form of violence or disappointment may occur and impair the child's quality of life and relationship with a parent (Jaffe et al., 2014). Social and personal insecurity in relationships with parents may affect the emergence and maintenance of psychopathology during adolescence and adulthood (Meeus, 2016).

The parents' behaviour towards one another and the child can be transferred to the child's relationships in adulthood – and thus generate other relationship problems. After their parents separate, children often lack the feeling of family and the presence of both parents, which makes them incapable of perceiving a quality and happy life (Běhounková, 2012). The quality of life and mental experi-

ence can also be affected by the child's feeling that they must decide which parent they prefer.

Divorce and the right to both parents

According to the Czech Statistical Office, in the Czech Republic almost half of all marriages are divorced (Štyglerová and Kačerová, 2014). The data show that, in 2013, the divorce rate reached 49%. Women filed 64% of the petitions, and 56% of all divorced couples had minor children (Štyglerová and Kačerová, 2014). However, this data only report on divorces, i.e., the termination of a legal marriage. Many families currently live in partnerships. Their break-ups are not always recorded if the parents have an oral agreement. Parental divorce or separation – and the resulting stress or possible disputes over the upbringing and care of children – affect a significant number of children and can negatively affect their quality of life (Eymann et al., 2009).

Parental divorce is also related to the more difficult exercise of the right to both parents, i.e., contact with both parents, which does not occur often (or at all) due to separate households. It is frequently related to various problems in handing over the child (Corradiniová, 2010). Unfortunately, some parents cannot agree on the care of their children, and the conditions of contact and care have to be determined by the court. Sometimes these are lengthy negotiations, and the parents appeal against the court's decision. If one of the parents tries to use their children as a tool to take revenge on their former partner by manipulating the child's opinion (targeted defamation, slander, trying to embarrass), or to have the child in complete care with the lowest frequency of contact with the other parent or banning the contact entirely (Clemente et al., 2019), it can be a problem.

Experiencing divorce and children's feelings

Divorce/separation of parents is always a significant change in a child's life. In the Czech Republic, divorce requires the approval of an agreement or the regulation of the parents' contact with a minor child (Rogalewiczová, 2016). In the case of a separation, this is not necessary, but at the request of one of the parents, the court must also approve the agreement for contact with the child. Parents'

motions are reviewed, and the court should always rule in the child's favour. In the case of an older child, it is possible, and the court should take their opinion into account. However, this can cause problems because the child has to decide which of the parents they want to stay with, which can seem to them they are showing preference to one of the parents. This puts a lot of pressure on the child because, under normal circumstances, he or she loves both parents equally. Other factors often involve one of the parents trying to persuade the child through manipulation, promises, speaking badly of the other parent or, in extreme cases, violence if the child does not say what the parent would like to hear. Clemente et al. (2019) state that these methods are used mainly by men. Violence against children occurs during and after divorce/separation, especially in those cases where it has already happened in the family before (Jaffe et al., 2014). Some parents also try to get the child on their side to hurt the other parent and take revenge. All of this puts enormous psychological pressure on the child, which affects how the child perceives their parents, family, and partnerships and may cause other problems in the future (Berc et al., 2006). Children in a children's home suffer from similar issues (Witzanyová and Velemínský, 2021), suggesting what serious impacts post-divorce/post-separation disputes can have. Prolonged child custody disputes using various means of manipulation are a significant threat to a child's development and may reduce their subjective quality of life (Clemente et al., 2019; Eymann et al., 2009).

This research aimed to find out how, specifically, a divorce/separation affects a child's life, including the psychological impacts and the child's right to both parents.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was conducted using qualitative document analysis. Secondary data analysis was used to document 10 case reports from the "Centre for Family and Interpersonal Relations and the Trust Line České Budějovice, p.s.c." database. This file was selected from this centre's database from 2016 to 2021. We selected 16 from 51 documents. These documents included the attempts of divorced par-

ents to get their children into their care. We used the snow-ball method to include 10 case studies in the final evaluation. We processed these according to the objectives of this study. The "Centre's" database was based on court and OSPOD's requests for an expert opinion in the South Bohemian Region. We evaluated 10 girls and 14 boys. The sample group included 22 children – 14 boys and 8 girls; 9 boys were at preschool and 5 were of school age; 4 girls were at preschool and 3 were of school age. One girl was older than 14 years. Families were functional for a certain time before the divorce/separation.

In the final phase, 10 cases were submitted for the thorough qualitative analysis on which this article is based. This documentation was analysed with a specialist psychologist. We used the technique of grounded theory to process the data and evaluated it using three-stage coding (open, axial, and selective). Approximately 100 codes were created, which we further categorized and merged into subcategories. A total of 4 main categories emerged, and anchored claims were established as the main result. We used the ATLAS.ti 9 software to process the research. We created a graphic output, which became the main result of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research assessed the impact on children's lives during or after their parents' divorce/separation. The analysis of the documents identified aspects that may affect the child's quality of life in connection with the breakdown of the parents' relationship – and identified possible problems related to this severe situation. The research also focused on the practical implementation of the right to both parents, which should be fulfilled even after the breakdown of the parents' partnership.

The case reports were processed graphically and by coding. The research results are shown in Diagram 1, which portrays the quality of life of children after the separation of their parents. During the research processing, we created approximately 100 codes, which we further worked on by categorizing and merging them into individual subcategories; 4 main categories emerged (K1 – Problems,

K2 – Right to both parents, K3 – Protracted disputes, K4 – Attempt to reach an agreement). The main result were established claims (see below). We used the ATLAS.ti 9 software to process the research. We created

a graphic output, which is the main result of the research. We included the evaluated results in individual categories and compared these with previous research and literature.

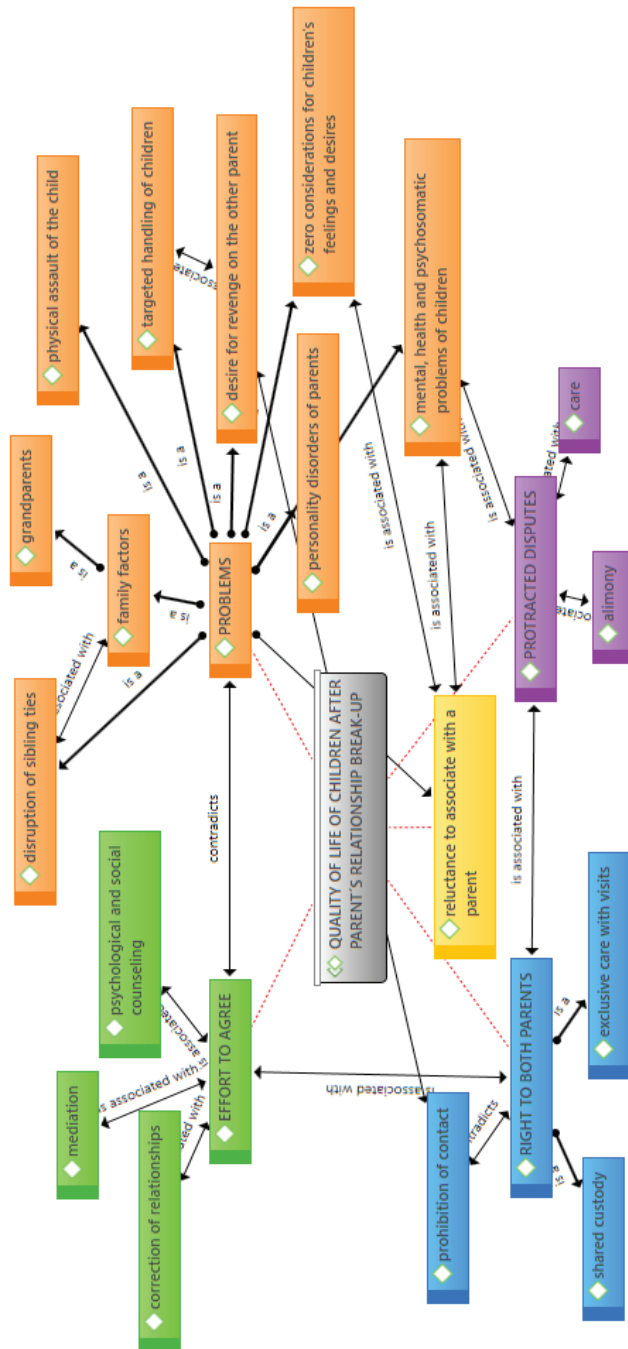


Diagram 1 – The quality of life of children after their parents' separation

Category – K1: Problems

According to the research results, parents' separation is always a challenging period for children – and the parents often do not make it easier for them. Separation is associated with many problems and difficulties, which often lead to protracted disputes. These problems and lengthy disputes can significantly impact a child's psyche, regardless of age. Kalmijna's research (2016), showed that after divorce/separation of their parents, children show more significant signs of depression than children of couples who have a positive relationship. This can result in a change in the relationship with one or both parents. Due to the strained relationship, the court is sometimes forced to place the child in a neutral environment, such as institutional care or with the grandparents. Sometimes, such a place can be more peaceful for the child, but they often experience a different trauma that affects their later life (as shown in the results of Witzanyová's research (2020)). The culmination of the overall disrupted relationship with the parents is the child's reluctance to see one of the parents. This research also assessed the fulfilment of the right to both parents and the forms in which this is implemented after the divorce: exclusive care with visits, shared custody, or forbidden contact. The successful fulfilment of this right is related to the ideal when there is an effort to agree and take care of the child's interests.

The quality of life of children after their parents' separation is significantly affected by the problems that arise after it. Unfortunately, the results of our research have shown that the desire to take revenge is very common, with children becoming a very effective and involuntary means of revenge for some fathers or mothers. The abandoned partner more often resorts to this behaviour. They use manipulation of the child and defamation of the other parent or try to get the child entirely into their own care without the possibility of contact with the other parent – all regardless what the child wants. Interestingly, our research shows that abandoned men more frequently have the desire for revenge. The analysis of the documents shows that this desire increases with the age difference between the partners. The research results of Clemente et al. (2019) agree with this statement. This can also be evidenced by the fact that, according to

data from the Czech Statistical Office, divorce proceedings are more often initiated by women (Štyglerová and Kačerová, 2014).

One of the causes of such reckless behaviour can be parental personality disorders, which expert psychologists often confirm. Parental personality disorders as a factor influencing the course of childcare disputes are also mentioned by Clemente et al. (2019). Various family relationships also interfere with the process of creating a childcare agreement, which can break ties with siblings or grandparents. However, there are cases where grandparents tend to intervene in disputes between parents and worsen the situation. An extreme example of a problem with child custody is the physical assault of the child, unless he or she says in court or the other parent what the father or mother wants from them. Jaffe et al. (2014) point out the violence associated with divorce/separation.

The problems mentioned above that relate to the quality of life of children after divorce/separation of parents can lead to the child's reluctance to stay in contact with one of the parents and significant psychological deprivation. Many authors also point out the danger of psychological deprivation and its influence on further development (Langmajer and Matějček, 2011; Wacker et al., 2017).

Category – K2: Right to both parents

According to the research, the child's right to both parents in the Czech Republic is mainly established by an agreement on the child's contact with the other parent who does not have the minor in their sole custody. Alternatively, the right is fulfilled by shared custody, which is not always suitable and can be very demanding for the child. Mahrer et al. (2018) state that a child's success and a good adaptation to shared custody depend on many factors, such as the child's gender. On the other hand, Rogalewiczová (2016) says that shared custody may be the only hope if one parent wants the child completely cut off from the other parent. However, the results of our research showed that, in exceptional cases in the Czech Republic, the contact and the child's right to both parents are reduced if such contact causes significant psychological damage and could cause irreversible damage to mental development. It is possible to restore contact gradually, but mostly in the presence of experts.

Category – K3: Protracted disputes

We can point out many interesting things that the study of documents brought. The finding that children suffer significantly from disputes between their parents is crucial. They especially suffer when forced to choose which parent they prefer, or when they have to choose words carefully so as not to injure one parent. According to various studies, this generates problematic future behaviour in relationships and oneself, including childhood experience (Witzanyová, and Velemínský 2021). A significant problem that parents' disputes cause for future self-settlement and partnerships is transgenerational transmission. Adult children unknowingly use models of the behaviour they saw in childhood, or are reserved in relationships for fear of the same scenarios they saw in childhood (Berc et al., 2006). Research has shown that children exposed to protracted disputes between their parents and their manipulations are often subject to great risk in their mental development, suffer from psychosomatic problems or other health problems, but most importantly, lose the joy of childhood they will never have the opportunity to experience again. This especially applies to children who witness protracted disputes between parents over the care of minors or the amount of alimony. Theunissen et al. (2017) state that parents' divorce/separation may be directly related to children's emotional perceptions and problems. Weaver and Schofield (2015) also support this. In terms of psychosomatic problems and other health problems, self-harm, or other destructive behaviour, can occur due to psychological deprivation (Wacker et al., 2017).

Category – K4: Attempt to reach an agreement

Social workers must appeal to parents in disputes to respect the child's best interests. The Cochem Practice model works well in practice. In this, parents are led to an agreement with the help of experts. This agreement is always preferred to the opinion of the court. The question is not whether both parents will participate in the care, but how the care will be divided between them, and a quick resolution of the dispute between the parents is preferred (Cochem.pro, © 2016–2020). It is unacceptable for parents to settle scores and try to harm their former partner through the chil-

dren. This is a big task for the future, on which social workers and the family law legislation in the Czech Republic, should certainly work. Rogalewiczová and Killarová (2015) state that no legislative changes are necessary to implement the Cochem practice. The advantage of the above-mentioned Cochem practice is its nearly 100% success because the parents often reach an agreement (Cochem.pro, © 2016–2020). Our research has shown that trying to reach an agreement or at least work through mediation, efforts to correct relationships, or psychological or social counselling, is an ideal way for fewer children to experience divorce/separation problems in the future. There are also many other means and forms of learning (such as dialectical behavioural therapy). Parents can learn to communicate and get along for the sake of their children (Behrman and Zimmerman, 2018). According to Kalmijn (2016), there is a significant correlation between symptoms of depression in children and conflict between parents, especially if there is frequent contact during the transfer of the child.

Grounded claims

The main findings of the research are the following statements: *“The subjective quality of life of children after divorce/separation is reduced mainly by the actions of parents trying to hurt and take revenge on the former partner”*, and *“The ideal way to correct relationships between parents is through mediation and psychological counselling, which can make it easier to fulfil the children's right to both parents”*. These grounded claims are based on research results established using a three-step coding process, in which the data were subjected to a thorough analysis, thus reflecting the main findings of the research.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis and interpretation of the obtained data revealed that divorce/separation of the parents is stressful for the children. Still, the most significant problems are caused by the parents trying to win disputes over the care of the children by various means. Doing this is ultimately the most hurtful for children. It threatens their successful mental development and can reduce their subjective

quality of life. This research is an initial probe into an issue that deserves closer study on a larger sample of respondents. As researchers, we propose continuing the research in a more extensive study that confirms or refutes these claims.

The results of this study should serve as a basis for further monitoring the quality of life of these children when they reach adulthood, i.e., whether these negative experiences will affect their quality of life in adulthood and

transgenerational transmission. Therefore, these individuals will be monitored until the age of 30 to determine whether the experiences affect their quality of life in adulthood, and whether negative experiences will be passed on to the next generation.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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